

John Cassian Conferences

Conference 9, Chapters 18-24

Chapter 18

Of the Lord's Prayer.

And so there follows after these different kinds of supplication a still more sublime and exalted condition which is brought about by the contemplation of God alone and by fervent love, by which the mind, transporting and flinging itself into love for Him, addresses God most familiarly as its own Father with a piety of its own. And that we ought earnestly to seek after this condition the formula of the Lord's prayer teaches us, saying Our Father. When then we confess with our own mouths that the God and Lord of the universe is our Father, we profess immediately that we have been called from our condition as slaves to the adoption of sons, adding next Which art in heaven, that, by shunning with the utmost horror all lingering in this present life, which we pass upon this earth as a pilgrimage, and what separates us by a great distance from our Father, we may the rather hasten with all eagerness to that country where we confess that our Father dwells, and may not allow anything of this kind, which would make us unworthy of this our profession and the dignity of an adoption of this kind, and so deprive us as a disgrace to our Father's inheritance, and make us incur the wrath of His justice and severity. To which state and condition of sonship when we have advanced, we shall immediately be inflamed with the piety which belongs to good sons, so that we shall bend all our energies to the advance not of our own profit, but of our Father's glory, saying to Him: Hallowed be Your name, testifying that our desire and our joy is His glory, becoming imitators of Him who said: He who speaks of himself, seeks his own

glory. But He who seeks the glory of Him who sent Him, the same is true and there is no unrighteousness in Him. John 7:18 Finally the chosen vessel being filled with this feeling wished that he could be anathema from Christ Romans 9:3 if only the people belonging to Him might be increased and multiplied, and the salvation of the whole nation of Israel accrue to the glory of His Father; for with all assurance could he wish to die for Christ as he knew that no one perished for life. And again he says: We rejoice when we are weak but you are strong. 2 Corinthians 13:9 And what wonder if the chosen vessel wished to be anathema from Christ for the sake of Christ's glory and the conversion of His own brethren and the privilege of the nation, when the prophet Micah wished that he might be a liar and a stranger to the inspiration of the Holy Ghost, if only the people of the Jews might escape those plagues and the going forth into captivity which he had announced in his prophecy, saying: Would that I were not a man that has the Spirit, and that I rather spoke a lie; Micah 2:11 – to pass over that wish of the Lawgiver, who did not refuse to die together with his brethren who were doomed to death, saying: I beseech You, O Lord; this people has sinned a heinous sin; either forgive them this trespass, or if You do not, blot me out of Your book which You have written. Exodus 32:31-32 But where it is said Hallowed be Your name, it may also be very fairly taken in this way: The hallowing of God is our perfection. And so when we say to Him Hallowed be Your name we say in other words, make us, O Father, such that we maybe able both to understand and take in what the hallowing of You is, or at any rate that You may be seen to be hallowed in our spiritual converse. And this is effectually fulfilled in our case when men see our good works, and glorify our Father Which is in heaven. Matthew 5:16

Chapter 19

Of the clause Your kingdom come.

The second petition of the pure heart desires that the kingdom of its Father may come at once; viz., either that whereby Christ reigns day by day in the saints (which comes to pass when the devil's rule is cast out of our hearts by the destruction of fowl sins, and God begins to hold sway over us by the sweet odour of virtues, and, fornication being overcome, charity reigns in our hearts together with tranquillity, when rage is conquered; and humility, when pride is trampled under foot) or else that which is promised in due time to all who are perfect, and to all the sons of God, when it will be said to them by Christ: Come you blessed of My Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; Matthew 25:34 (as the heart) with fixed and steadfast gaze, so to speak, yearns and longs for it and says to Him Your kingdom come. For it knows by the witness of its own conscience that when He shall appear, it will presently share His lot. For no guilty person would dare either to say or to wish for this, for no one would want to face the tribunal of the Judge, who knew that at His coming he would immediately receive not the prize or reward of his merits but only punishment.

Chapter 20

Of the clause Your will be done.

The third petition is that of sons: Your will be done as in heaven so on earth. There can now be no grander prayer than to wish that earthly things may be made equal with things heavenly: for what else is it to say Your will be done as in heaven so on earth, than to ask that men may be like angels and that as God's will is ever fulfilled by them in

heaven, so also all those who are on earth may do not their own but His will? This too no one could say from the heart but only one who believed that God disposes for our good all things which are seen, whether fortunate or unfortunate, and that He is more careful and provident for our good and salvation than we ourselves are for ourselves. Or at any rate it may be taken in this way: The will of God is the salvation of all men, according to these words of the blessed Paul: Who wills all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth. 1 Timothy 2:4 Of which will also the prophet Isaiah says in the Person of God the Father: And all Your will shall be done. Isaiah 46:10 When we say then Your will be done as in heaven so on earth, we pray in other words for this; viz., that as those who are in heaven, so also may all those who dwell on earth be saved, O Father, by the knowledge of You.

Chapter 21

Of our supersubstantial or daily bread.

Next: Give us this day our bread which is ἐπιούσιον, i.e., supersubstantial, which another Evangelist calls daily. The former indicates the quality of its nobility and substance, in virtue of which it is above all substances and the loftiness of its grandeur and holiness exceeds all creatures, while the latter intimates the purpose of its use and value. For where it says daily it shows that without it we cannot live a spiritual life for a single day. Where it says today it shows that it must be received daily and that yesterday's supply of it is not enough, but at it must be given to us today also in like manner. And our daily need of it suggests to us that we ought at all times to offer up this prayer, because there is no day on which we have no need to strengthen the heart of our inner man, by eating and receiving it, although the expression used, today may be taken to apply to his

present life, i.e., while we are living in this world supply us with this bread. For we know that it will be given to those who deserve it by You hereafter, but we ask that You would grant it to us today, because unless it has been vouchsafed to a man to receive it in this life he will never be partaker of it in that.

Chapter 22

Of the clause: Forgive us our debts, etc.

And forgive us our debts as we also forgive our debtors. O unspeakable mercy of God, which has not only given us a form of prayer and taught us a system of life acceptable to Him, and by the requirements of the form given, in which He charged us always to pray, has torn up the roots of both anger and sorrow, but also gives to those who pray an opportunity and reveals to them a way by which they may move a merciful and kindly judgment of God to be pronounced over them and which somehow gives us a power by which we can moderate the sentence of our Judge, drawing Him to forgive our offenses by the example of our forgiveness: when we say to Him: Forgive us as we also forgive. And so without anxiety and in confidence from this prayer a man may ask for pardon of his own offenses, if he has been forgiving towards his own debtors, and not towards those of his Lord. For some of us, which is very bad, are inclined to show ourselves calm and most merciful in regard to those things which are done to God's detriment, however great the crimes may be, but to be found most hard and inexorable exactors of debts to ourselves even in the case of the most trifling wrongs. Whoever then does not from his heart forgive his brother who has offended him, by this prayer calls down upon himself not forgiveness but condemnation, and by his own profession asks that he himself may be judged more severely, saying: Forgive me as I also have forgiven.

And if he is repaid according to his own request, what else will follow but that he will be punished after his own example with implacable wrath and a sentence that cannot be remitted? And so if we want to be judged mercifully, we ought also to be merciful towards those who have sinned against us. For only so much will be remitted to us, as we have remitted to those who have injured us however spitefully. And some dreading this, when this prayer is chanted by all the people in church, silently omit this clause, for fear lest they may seem by their own utterance to bind themselves rather than to excuse themselves, as they do not understand that it is in vain that they try to offer these quibbles to the Judge of all men, who has willed to show us beforehand how He will judge His suppliants. For as He does not wish to be found harsh and inexorable towards them, He has marked out the manner of His judgment, that just as we desire to be judged by Him, so we should also judge our brethren, if they have wronged us in anything, for he shall have judgment without mercy who has shown no mercy. James 2:13

Chapter 23

Of the clause: Lead us not into temptation.

Next there follows: And lead us not into temptation, on which there arises no unimportant question, for if we pray that we may not be suffered to be tempted, how then will our power of endurance be proved, according to this text: Every one who is not tempted is not proved; Sirach 34:11 and again: Blessed is the man that endures temptation? James 1:12 The clause then, Lead us not into temptation, does not mean this; viz., do not permit us ever to be tempted, but do not permit us when we fall into temptation to be overcome. For Job was tempted, but was not led into temptation. For he did not ascribe folly to God nor blasphemy, nor with impious

mouth did he yield to that wish of the tempter toward which he was drawn. Abraham was tempted, Joseph was tempted, but neither of them was led into temptation for neither of them yielded his consent to the tempter. Next there follows: But deliver us from evil, i.e., do not suffer us to be tempted by the devil above that we are able, but make with the temptation a way also of escape that we may be able to bear it. 1 Corinthians 10:13

Chapter 24

How we ought not to ask for other things, except only those which are contained in the limits of the Lord's Prayer.

You see then what is the method and form of prayer proposed to us by the Judge Himself, who is to be prayed to by it, a form in which there is contained no petition for riches, no thought of honours, no request for power and might, no mention of bodily health and of temporal life. For He who is the Author of Eternity would have men ask of Him nothing uncertain, nothing paltry, and nothing temporal. And so a man will offer the greatest insult to His Majesty and Bounty, if he leaves on one side these eternal petitions and chooses rather to ask of Him something transitory and uncertain; and will also incur the indignation rather than the propitiation of the Judge by the pettiness of his prayer